

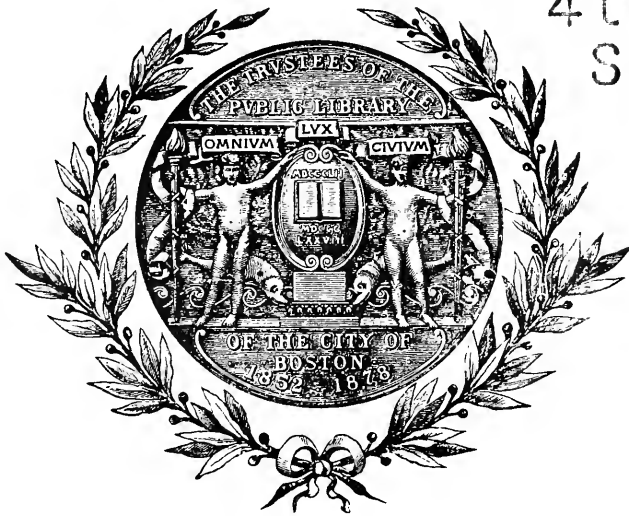


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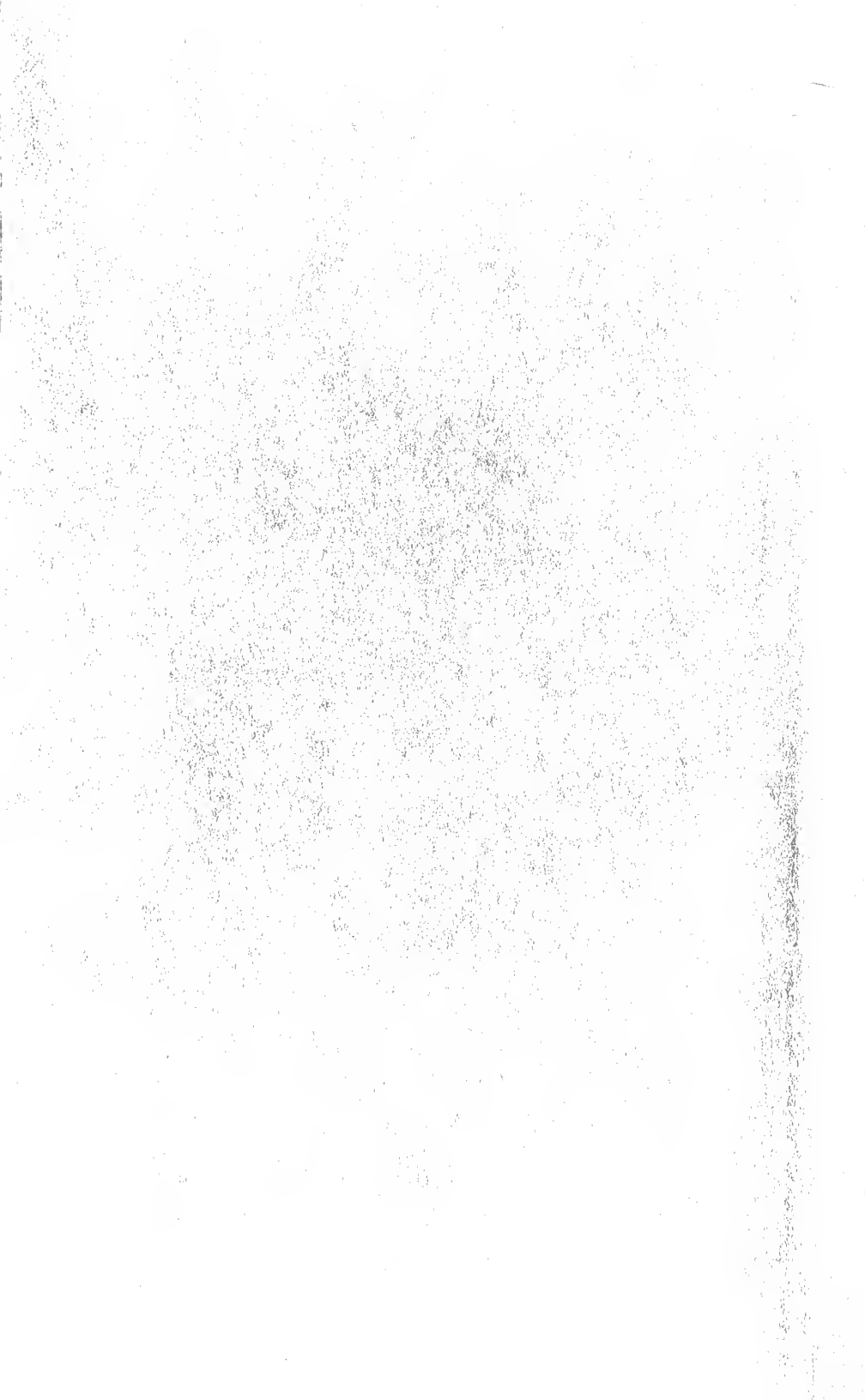
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# THE PREACHING OF THE CROSS.

BY

REV. WILLIAM H. LYON, D.D.



AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION,

BOSTON.

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“The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity ; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose.” — ARTICLE I. *of the By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

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## THE PREACHING OF THE CROSS.

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“THE preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness, but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.” — 1 Cor. i. 18.

THE cross to-day is an ornament and an honor. It tops the spires of splendid churches. It is covered with jewels and worn at the throats of rich women. It is stamped on elegantly bound prayer-books. It gives the ground plan for grand cathedrals.

It was not so nineteen centuries ago. Then it was the apparatus of a disgraceful punishment. It was the gallows of the day. If some old Roman, Cicero or Seneca, should come among us to-day and see the cross so held in honor, he would be shocked. He would feel as you and I would feel if nineteen centuries from now we should come back to the earth and find the most sacred places — the altars, the spires, the bosoms of priests and nuns — decorated with the shape of the modern gallows.

The reason is that once a spirit shone from the cross which utterly overcame the disgrace of it, and turned it into glory. The improbability that any one can ever make the gallows so glorious is the measure in part of the power of that life and death nineteen hundred years ago. The first word, then, in the preaching of the cross, is the conquest of circumstances by character. If

you take some hideous thing and hold it up against the sun, it will be lost in the blaze of light. Hold it against the gas-jet, and it is the flame that is lost; you see only the repulsive thing. So a weak character is lost in the repulsiveness of the circumstances amid which it is placed. Its dignity seems to itself to be gone. It feels degraded by the work it has to do, the burdens it has to bear, the adversities it has to suffer. The world, looking at these circumstances, sees only them and not the soul that lies behind them. But a strong soul shines through and all around its circumstances. You do not think of them at all if they be unworthy; and if they be splendid, you think of them only as a fit setting for the soul. Are there not houses into which you go, very humble and very plain, which you hardly think of as such, so beautiful is the life that is lived there? When the man comes into the humble room a glory comes with him that gilds the furniture with a gold which the cabinet-maker cannot lay on, and fills the room with a light which no glittering chandelier could give. Another man might come into the room, a man who must borrow all the glory he has from his surroundings or his havings, and at once you feel the poverty of the room, and pity the man so circumstanced. Or it may be a fine house; but as the owner comes into the room, it seems somehow to dwarf and dim him. The house seems to own him, and not he the house.

Of course there are circumstances that lift the man. We can no more be entirely independent of them than of our body, which is only our nearest circumstance. But the man must be large enough to control them,—to make them work for him, and not himself for them. Money may help a good life, as a skilful setting helps the lustre of a good gem. It may give a man the fine quality of

independence, and set him free from that temptation to subserviency and hypocrisy and flattery which so eats at the self-respect of the poor. As the wind can get no hold upon the water that has a thin film of oil upon it, and cannot work it up into foaming waves, so many of the vexations and temptations of life may pass harmlessly over the weak man who is covered with a little property. But the lesson which every strong life has taught the world is the power it has to *give* to circumstances, and not to borrow from them. The heroes of the world — the world of business as well as the world of scholarship, or travel, or war, or reform — have told us with the unanimous testimony of their experience that there is no obstacle so great, no degradation so deep, no bodily infirmity so crippling, no lack of influence so discouraging, no disappointment so disastrous, that it may not be not only overcome, but transformed into strength and the means of new success.

But the preaching of the cross goes beyond even this. It speaks not only to those who are in misfortune, but especially to those who feel their misfortune as a disgrace. To some extent this is true of all spirited and energetic souls. To fail is very near to sin. The world punishes it almost as if it were the same. In fact, it often welcomes the sinner where it shuts out the unfortunate. Small wonder, then, that the disappointed man should feel the bruise of failure almost as keenly as if it were the sting of dishonor. It is just to this frame of mind — morbid, if you choose, but certainly real and often unavoidable — that the preaching of the cross appeals. It holds up that weak and falling form upon the instrument of disgrace, side by side with the world-wide honor and fame, yes, the deification which has come upon it, and bids the shame-stricken man of to-day not to faint or despair. It tells

him not only to look at itself, but to look at the cases within his own knowledge — yes, at some facts in his own life — where adversity has been turned into strength. To them that are foolish, the lesson will have no value. They will continue to think only of the present trouble and disappointment, and look forward to no change. But to those who have the strength of soul and will that can save, it is indeed the power of God. It is a glorious reminder of that infinite strength which is ready to be drawn upon by every brave man or woman who, though cast down, refuses to be destroyed, — though faint, yet pursues.

So the first lesson of the cross is the conquest of circumstances by character. The second is that suffering is not necessarily the result of the sin of the sufferer. Whether it is the result of sin at all we must consider later; but it certainly shows that it may be no judgment upon him who suffers. Here is one who was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin; yet he was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. The first thought of one who should see the crucifix would be a wonder what that man had done that he should suffer so, and in so wondering he would voice a certain guilty instinct in us all that what we suffer is the punishment of the sins we have done. In older and less thoughtful days this idea was stronger than now, and great was the additional suffering which came from it. That the insane were possessed of devils whom their sinful condition had invited in; that blindness and lameness were the signs, as they were the penalties, of some past wickedness; that poverty, childlessness, early death were branded with the black mark of a disgraceful cause, — this is the old superstition which still lurks around us. Jesus answered it in words which ought forever to have banished it. He answered it still more plainly, though unconsciously, by his life and death. That

poverty is in itself disgrace, that to labor with the hands is degradation, that to be shut out from the favor and company of the high and mighty of the land is dishonor, are ideas that can have no further currency in the mouths, or approval in the ears, of those who believe that Jesus was even a good man; and the actual bodily sufferings which he underwent, yet which, though they were directly inflicted by men, must have had the permission of God, are the answers to those who have said that sickness and pain are the results of sin in those who suffer. Jesus did not sin, and yet he suffered.

But the same is true of his death. Here was not only death, but a premature death, for he was but a little over thirty. Has it nothing to say to that question so often asked in agony, "Why should so good a man die and so many bad men be left?" That question comes out of an uneasy feeling that the death we mourn, like the first one in the old Scripture story, came from sin. We resent the premature death as a slur, somehow, upon the life. We cannot get the lurking superstition out of our minds. To this the death of Jesus gives at least a negative answer. That one so holy should die so soon severs sin from death as by the shears of Atropos. Again, it is granted that the death came from man and not by disease. Still it was permitted. God cannot be cleared from complicity in it. Moreover, the great physicians who have studied the symptoms given in the Gospel declare their belief that Jesus was of weak constitution, and that he died largely from the effects of his sorrow, — died of a broken heart.

So pain and death are no signs of sin in him who undergoes them. That is the negative lesson of the cross. But that they are often the result of others' sin, — that is the positive lesson of the cross. Jesus hangs there as the

symbol through all time of that dark and pathetic fact of human life that the innocent suffer for the guilty, — not instead of them, but because of them. We know the old *doctrine* of the atonement, now so fast falling into *silence*, even among those whose religious ancestors once proclaimed it, — that God, angry with the sins of men, would or could accept no reconciliation except through the sacrifice of his divine son. We have no quarrel now with that old doctrine. Error in form, as it is now confessed to be, it yet held a great sad truth which the observation of every day repeats in the concrete, — that the sins of men fall not only on their own shoulders, but upon the shoulders of the innocent. The *race* is always punished for sin, but the consequences do not always drop, as we should think they would, upon the sinner alone. The little child comes into the world, suffers a few months, and gives up its life. It has done nothing wrong. It bears the dreadful consequence of its father's or mother's carelessness or wickedness. Or it carries through years a burden of crippling or disease that increases with the consciousness of it and the experience of its results, not because it has sinned, but because of the ignorance or the indulgence of some one whose blood is in its veins. There are hearts dark with grief and shame, not because they have done evil, but because some one of the family has gone wrong. He will bear his own burden of dishonor and banishment for his fraud, but these others, who had no part in the crime, have perhaps a keener shame. We are all victims in some way of some other man's sin, as we all in some way make other men suffer for our sin. Why this should be we cannot stop to ask now. We can only see as we pass that God punishes us in this way through our love, that if the sight of our own disadvantage has no effect upon us, the sight of the woe which our sin brings upon those



we love better than ourselves may touch us. And he punishes us also through our admiration, that we may realize how enormous is the sin which not only makes us suffer, but those who are good and noble. But of this fact of the suffering of the innocent because of the guilty, and of the subtle punishment which God sends upon us through what is tenderest and highest in our hearts and souls, the cross is the symbol.

That was no legal fiction which was acted out upon Calvary. It was no God masquerading in human form, seeming to suffer that another God might seem to accept the sacrifice. Nor was it such a travesty of justice as God *accepting* the suffering of an innocent being instead of the punishment of the real offenders. If that be justice, then all our statutes and courts and prisons are horrible mistakes, and all the instinctive workings of the human conscience are dreadful distortions. There is no vicarious atonement in this sense. There is no substitution, no calling the innocent guilty, or the guilty innocent. Calling them so will never make them so, even though it were the Almighty who called them. God requires no reconciliation. He is always ready to forgive and restore, as gravitation is always ready to take the stone back to the earth when you let it go. It is man that must be reconciled to God; man that must see the enormity of his sin as God sees it; man that must come back home of his own free will, by the working of his own soul, by the clearing of his own sight. It is upon man that the suffering of the innocent Christ is to work, that he may see, as it were, in capital letters, the lesson which is printed small in his own home, — short-sighted man that he is, — that he may see how wide the effects of his sin fly, and how high they reach. Our life is no shooting gallery, in which the shots we fire amiss are kept

safely in. They fly out and wound others, — not only the chance passer-by, but the children of our own hearts, the friends of our own bosoms. No man can see that cross, and understand it, without running back with a shudder to his own life, to see what he has done to infect the world with sin, and with the sorrow and pain that come from it; without turning anxiously to the distresses of those who are dear to him, their failures and their woes, to see what part in them his own sins have played. All misfortune, indeed, is not the consequence of sin, but much of it is; and human woes, when the cross looms above them, stir the conscience as well as the sympathy. They make us shiver with a sense of personal responsibility. The sin that made this good man suffer, that darkened that woman's life, that brought disease and pain and uselessness into that child's whole mortal career, is the same sin that I have cherished. The act was not mine, but the roots of it are in me. How soon may not some sudden shoot from them spring up and bear the same poison to another's life! That is the warning, rebuking, saddening lesson which the cross brings into our careless and thoughtless moments. Do not curse the Jew for that fearful consequence of his bigotry and stubbornness. That is over. But see whether the same conceit of your own infallibility be not in yourself. If it is, let the cross warn you, that you be not yourself fit for cursing.

But there is a more lovely lesson than this which streams from the cross. It shows us how beautiful is the sacrifice for others' sake which is willingly made! The death and disgrace of Jesus were not necessary. He could have avoided them. He could have gone back to his carpenter's bench or to his solitary musings over the prophets of his people. His sacrifice was a willing one.

He steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem. What befell him there was no unforeseen entanglement. He knew, if not the details, yet the main result that was to come.

And it was not for his own sake, — not, as even his nearest disciples stubbornly believed to the last, to make himself a king. He had met that temptation and silenced it forever. The question as between his own will and God's was settled. He had the truth to speak. He had the love of his people in his heart. The more they turned against him, the more he determined to give himself for them, because the more they showed how much they needed it. The cross stands, then, for deliberate and loving sacrifice for others' misfortune and sin, and so stands for the sweetest and noblest thing God ever lets the sun shine on.

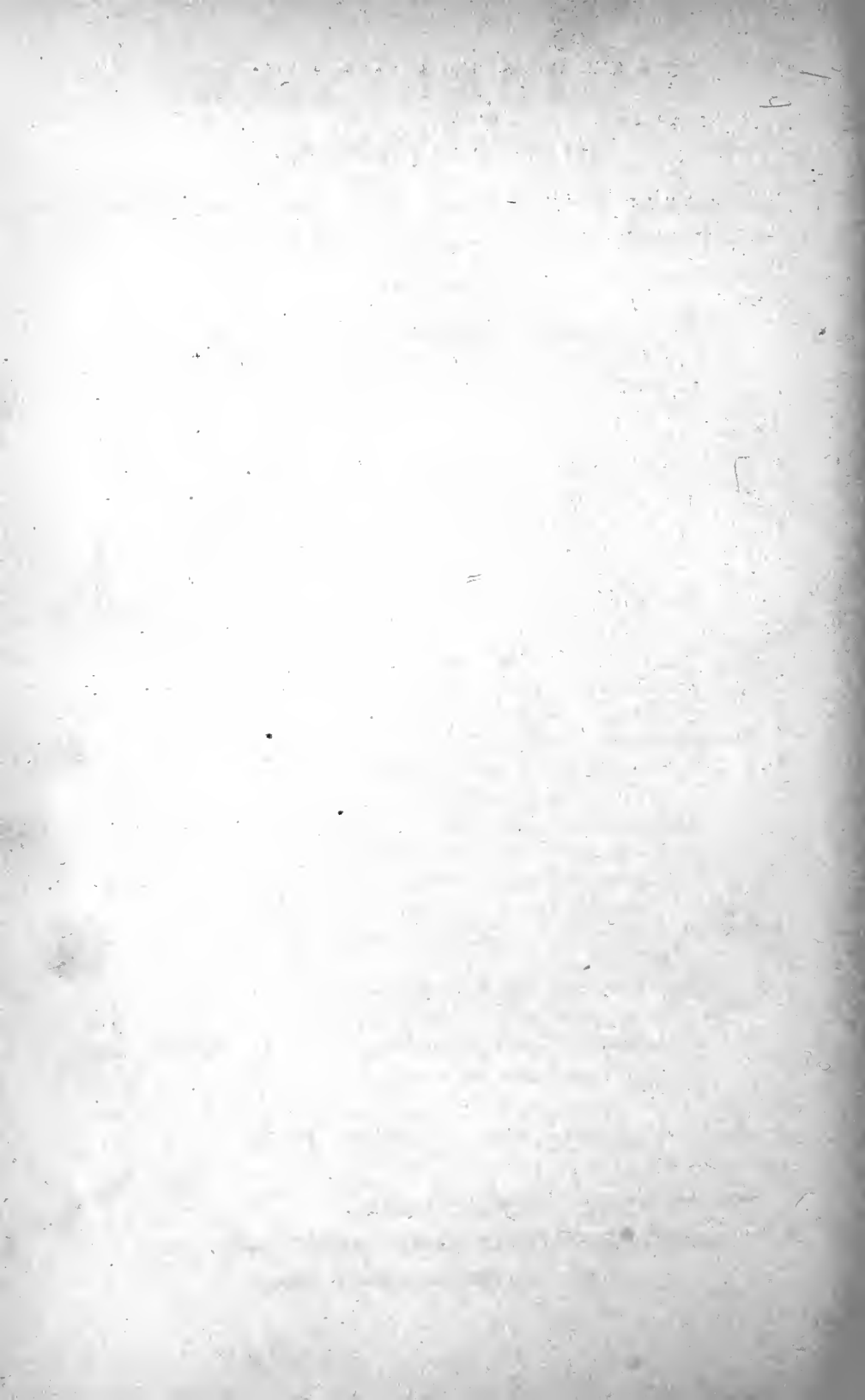
There is more of this in the world than we often think. We look out into the struggling mob of laborers and employers, the whole mass of men and women, who seem to be wrestling with each other in the mad rush for money, and we grow cynical. We talk of the material age and the love of gain. But in the very fiercest of those wrestlers and racers there may lie a warm and tender love, which is the motive power of all his struggling. It is not for himself, perhaps, that he rushes for money, but for the future of a little child at home, for the comfort of an invalid wife, for a boy at college, carelessly flinging hard-earned money away, or a girl who grows shallow and frivolous by the very love he gives her. Walk through the cotton mill. These are not interesting faces, but there are affections which can light up those faces with the very glory of heaven. They are capable of great sacrifices. "The short and simple annals of the poor" are worth the cynic's reading. Your daily paper, if you read it with

eyes open for such things, will show them to you. There was that family of a sick mother and three or four children, in New York, turned out upon the sidewalk for default in the rent. The grandmother and sister took them up into their own room in the attic, and the whole six or seven starved together in the one room till some one found them and gave to them out of the general abundance. As the baby Christ was said to light up the old stable into which he was born, with the grace of his countenance, so that willing sacrifice, brought to birth among the rags and squalor of a New York tenement attic, made it beautiful with celestial light.

All around us are those who are quietly bearing the discomfort and the privation, the mortification and the shame, which are the crosses on which the good are fastened for the help of the bad. All labors of reformers; all pains taken by the sound for the sick and the insane, by the upright for the criminal, by the happy for the outcast and the foundling, — all the unromantic cares in homes for those who need or submit to be suffered for, — all these in varying degree, as the stars differ in glory, are points where heaven shines through the fogs and clouds of the earthly state. Sometimes a prominent case lights up the principle. We all remember the sadness that went over the country years ago when a trusted cabinet officer, a brave general in the war, was found guilty of gross fraud. He stopped the investigation at a certain point, pleaded guilty, and went into the disgrace that awaited him. At last he died; and it came out, at least to many of us, for the first time, that the sin he had suffered for was not his, but that of a member of his family, and that the point at which he stopped the investigation was the point at which her guilt was about to be exposed. He shouldered the odium, and staggered

under it till he fell into his grave. It was well done. It was a braver and higher deed than any war record could have shown for him. But there are many of them. They are not all high enough to be seen of many, but their sacrifice is great, and as great is the willingness with which they make it, if only the object of it can be helped.

Such is the symbolism of the cross. As the anchor speaks to us of faith, so the cross speaks to us of love. It is a misfortune that abuse of it has banished it from our churches and our chambers. It belongs not to Catholic or Episcopalian, but to the Christian. It is the flag of Christianity. It is the sign of what is deepest and purest in the influence of the master; and if it could only speak to us of the things it really stands for, it should tower above every church and shine in every home. And even as it is, it might well stand before us every morning as we rise for the day's life, as a reminder of that unselfishness which is the centre of Christianity and the crown of manhood.



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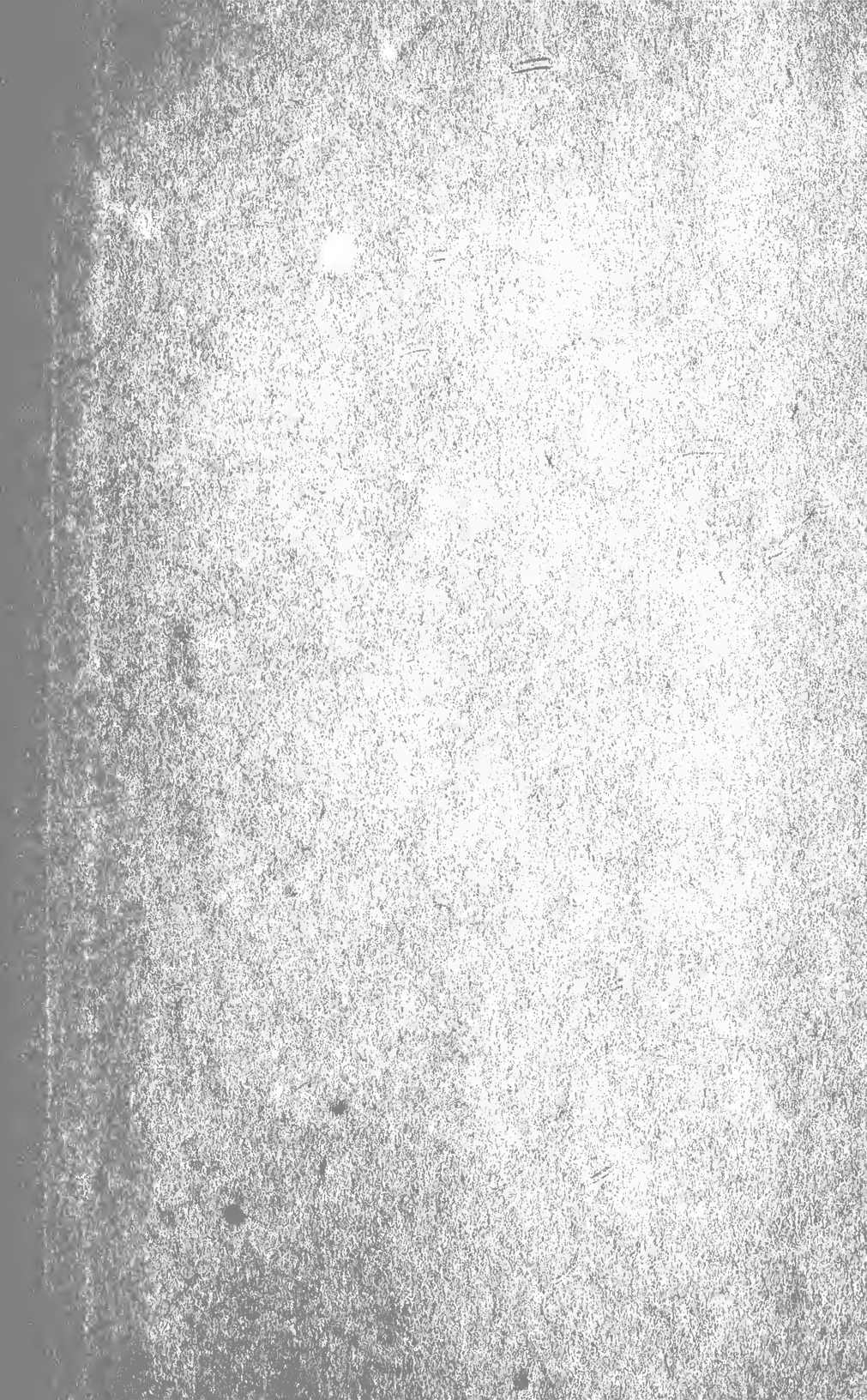
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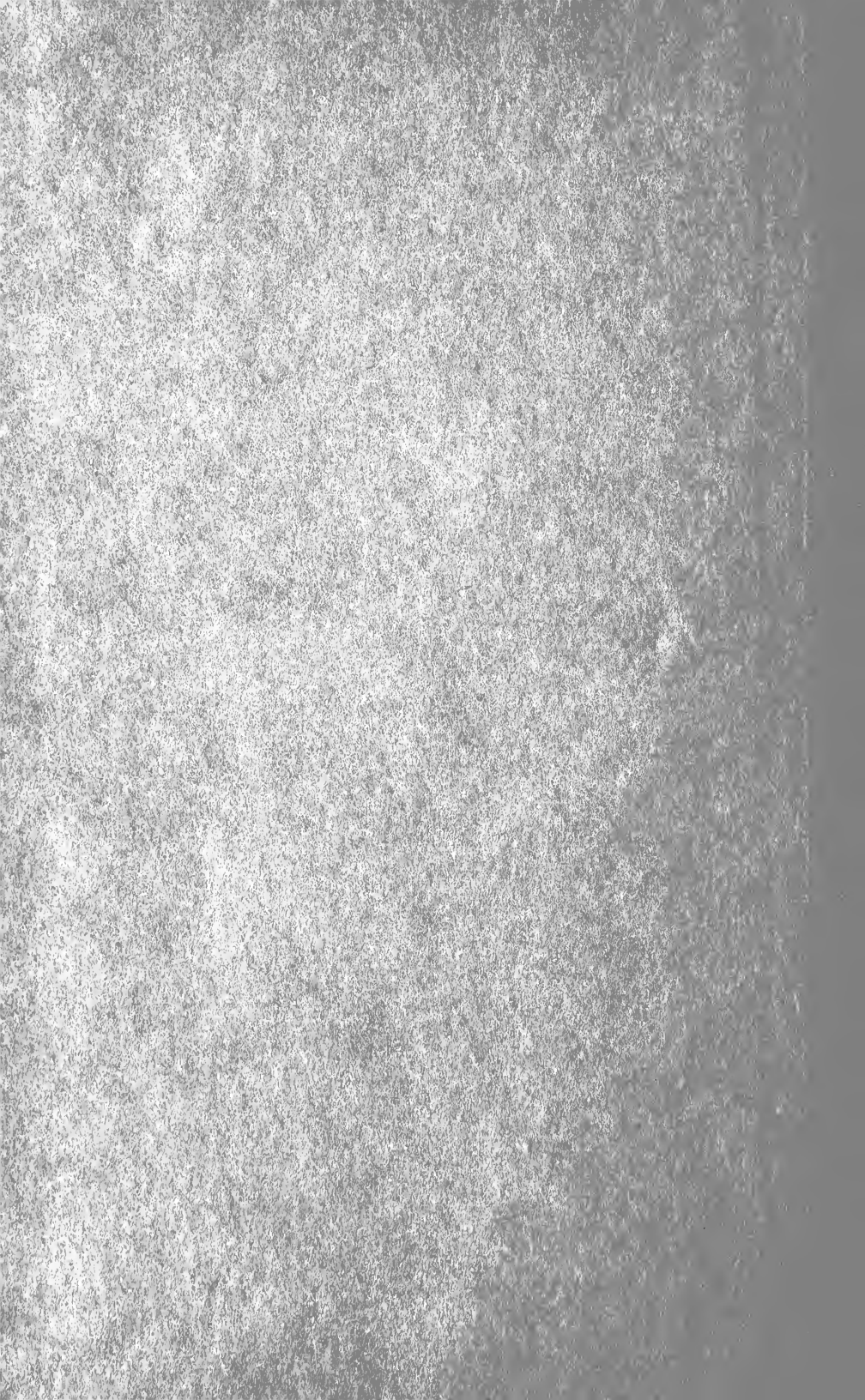
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